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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in the inner city of Houston, Texas with three parent groups and four pupil groups to determine what parents did which would have an influence on student outcomes. Parent groups (selected from those who had fifth-grade children) included parents who attended training sessions and also those who attended training sessions and helped tutor students. This paper analyzes why parents came to training sessions regarding elementary school mathematics, their reactions to the sessions, and recommendations for future sessions. Comments regarding parental attitudes comprise most of the paper. (Author/RH)

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Inner City Parents Attended Mathematics Classes - Why?

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A study was conducted to assess whether teaching parents unfamiliar portions of the school curriculum and providing them with insights into the problems of learning would unobtrusively enhance the school experience of their own children (Johnson 1975). The results of this study produced no statistically significant results. However, the anecdotal data collected proved noteworthy and interesting.

It is reported by Christopher Jencks et al.(1972) and James Coleman et al.(1966) that one of the primary influences on attitude and achievement is the family --particularly the parents. Needless to say, the educational process has changed somewhat since many parents were pupils themselves. These changes tend to leave many parents seemingly "helpless" because school "ideas" and "methods" appear to be quite different. If parents are expected to encourage their children, then parent education appears to be a necessary component in the child's academic education(Riles 1969).

The present study was conducted in the inner city of Houston, Texas. There were three parent groups and four pupil groups. The parent groups were composed of parents having fifth grade children: (1) those who received no training; (2) those who received training only; and (3) those who received training and tutored fifth grade

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children. The pupil groups were identified as fifth graders: (1) those having non-trained parents; (2) those having trained parents; (3) those having trained parents who tutored; and (4) those who were tutored but did not have parents who participated in the study. Due to space limitation, the comprehensive design of the study will not be discussed here. The interested reader may refer to the longer paper cited above.

Within the major study the thinking of the parents was the pivotal point of action. It was believed that what the parents did directly or indirectly with their children would have an affect on their children. There is no source within the design of the study to discuss what each parent did within their personal world to affect the learning of their children. However, it was believed that incidentally and honestly certain cues would be given by parents as to what interactions were resulting from the treatment. The sole source of the information discussed in this article came from recording comments and reactions of parents involved in the training and tutoring phases of the study.

The discussion of the anecdotal information will try to give insight into five basic questions: (1) Why did parents come to these sessions? (2) What were the questions and concerns of the parents that were trained? (3) What did parents appear to enjoy? (4) How did parents feel about the sessions at the end? (5) What suggestions were made by parents for future sessions?

## What Were Some Reasons Why Parents Came to the Sessions?

Among the many reasons why parents came to the sessions was that of pure curiosity. Some parents made it known at the beginning

that they were not committing themselves to keep on coming. All they wanted to do was to see "what it was all about". (It was interesting to note that every parent came back after the first session.)

Another reason why parents attended these sessions was due to the close proximity of the school to their homes. It appeared that the closest school was the one that was attended. The school that was near but not the closest received very little participation by outside parents. At the same time, this is quite understandable because just about every parent involved worked during the evening or during the day. Time was much valued by those who were tired or had many personal obligations to fulfill.

A third reason why parents attended the sessions was because someone they knew was also attending. During the first few sessions, several parents asked if they could bring a friend. Some did from the beginning and others made friends with others who were attending.

A fourth reason why some parents attended the sessions was to learn something that their children did not already know but would probably be learning. As an example of this, one parent gloated over the fact that she was able to show one of her children something that he did not already know. Some parents further illustrated this by reciting mathematics concepts to their children that they knew the children did not know, but, at the same time, neither did the parents. Every parent brought notebooks to record these bits and pieces of information to show their families. It was interesting to note that they (the parents) also tried to explain everything they learned to their families. They would come

back weekly seemingly frustrated because they left each session with apparent understanding of what was discussed only to run into logical problems while trying to explain them to their family members. For this reason, many parents felt that they were not learning anything--especially at the beginning of each session.

The above paragraph was a basis for identifying the fifth reason why parents attended: to be able to help their children. Without a doubt the parents wanted to be able to coach their children whenever they had mathematical problems. In one case, a parent had no intention of coming to the session one week when her son presented her with a mathematics homework problem that perplexed her. She could have nonchalantly brushed the child aside but instead she jumped in her car and drove to the school for help.

A reason for attending sessions that was evident in several instances was to help further their own aspirations. One of the older parents wanted to see if she could still learn. Several wanted to complete their educations. Most wanted to learn skills that would facilitate their upward mobility in society. And still yet, one had aspirations but did not want to be recognized for her learning. This was because her husband never completed the elementary grades and tended to demonstrate anxiety when his wife talked about going back to school to learn. Under the guise of learning how to help her children, she attempted to increase her learning which she could not do by herself in the confines of her home.

What Kinds of Questions and Concerns Were Exhibited by Participating Parents?

Increasing apathy on the part of the teachers was a perceived concern of the parents. They cited instances where children no longer get homework; their children complained about the teacher not caring; schools didn't notify parents about events that concerned them until it was too late to make a decision; etc. Among the reasons they gave was the fact that most of the teachers were Anglo or were new to the school and/or teaching profession. Consequently, the interaction of these faults contributed to their child's lack of interest in school. In fact, one parent volunteered that when her child is "sick" of school, the only reason she could give for perservering more school is the fact that even though the child was not learning anything, "messing up" in school would be very costly in the future and would probably tend to hold her down.

A second area of concern was why there were so many inconsistencies in what their children were being taught. It was the experience of some of the parents that just as they were getting to the point of understanding the mathematics curriculum that their children were getting, someone would change the books, etc. The education of their children appeared to be without a master plan or concern. Consequently, many of these parents seemed to be helpless in explaining the 'whys' of mathematics to their children.

A third area of parental concern was in respect to mathematical ideas that were common in everyday decision making. Generally, this area of concern can be called consumer mathematics. An example of the parents' concerns in this area covered such topics as

fractions, price indexing, percentages, discounting, interest rates, amortization of loans, crediting, units of measure, etc. These concerns had to be "drawn out" of the parents through discussions. After the first few consumer mathematics discussions, parents felt relatively free to identify specific concerns. These discussions were usually held before or after the planned activities for the study.

What Did Parents Appear to Enjoy?

The initial activities used in the earlier sessions were to help parents think through behaviors that they had learned earlier in their lives. Representing number, adding, subtracting, etc., were not real items of concern for them. They wanted to know about bases other than base ten but the thinking strategies used were geared to one mode of learning. Through the use of activities that appeared to be entirely new "tricks" that they had never used or learned, many parents became more original in their learning styles. The parents enjoyed the newer ideas used in learning the basic facts. They enjoyed the elegance of using cartesian plane activities.

The personal attention that the parents received was acknowledged. They enjoyed having someone to interpret some of the "whys" of local school actions. The help with consumer ideas was always followed up by reinforcing questions from the parents. The parents reported how they demonstrated some ideas to their friends or to people with whom they worked. It was obvious that the parents also enjoyed each other.

How Did Parents Feel About the Sessions at the End?

Some parents who were in the training-only group wanted the sessions to continue. Of these, some wanted to come as long as one had something to teach them. Another wanted to bring her children to the sessions because she felt that they would enjoy them. Of the parents who continued into the tutoring phase of the treatment, most wanted to continue coming for whatever learning was offered and to assist by tutoring. These parents felt more comfortable about their tutoring when they were taught the mathematics ideas before they taught them to the children.

What Suggestions Were Made By Parents For Future Sessions?

The participating parents gave several and varied ideas about future sessions for parents: (1) they suggested that such sessions be open to all parents; (2) they suggested the inclusion of other subject areas; and (3) some parents wanted the sessions closer together. It is interesting to note that no parent perceived that the treatment curriculum was inappropriate. They just wanted more.

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